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LIFESTYLE COLUMNISTS

Learn about Pope Francis

Yesterday 7:58 p.m.

I only vaguely remember grainy images on television when Pope John Paul II was elected in 1978, so watching the smoke emerge from a solitary smoke stack live over the internet in March 2013 was a new and moving experience for me.

When the papal enclave elected Jorge Mario Bergoglio the new pope, it marked some exciting firsts that stirred a new optimism among many Catholics and curiosity among those outside the mysterious world of Catholicism.

Known for humility, and a preference for living simply, Bergoglio is the first pope to hail from the Americas. He also is the first pope from the Jesuit order and the first to take his name from St. Francis. But how does that shape the man now overseeing a church 1.2 billion strong?

If you have ever seen a garden statue depicting a man surrounded by a menagerie of animals, you already may have a vague idea of St. Francis. This statue is a popular depiction of a man who is the patron saint of animals and who believed that nature was a reflection of God.

Your Abilene Public Library has many materials to help you learn more about this important figure in Catholic history. "Chasing Francis: A Pilgrim's Tale," by Ian Morgan Cron, traces the journey of a pastor experiencing a crisis of faith. He rediscovers his faith by

tracing the footsteps of St. Francis, whose simple way of loving Jesus had great impact on history.

Another title to consider is "Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi." Author Donald Spoto gained unprecedented access to unexplored archives, plus Francis's own letters, for this work. Elegant and insightful, this book depicts a man whose emphasis on charity brought about a new social movement.

This pivotal saint clearly influenced Pope Francis, but the pope also was shaped, in large part, by his Jesuit training. This order of priesthood places a high emphasis on education. "The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present," by John W. O'Malley, is a lively history of the Jesuit order that explains how it differs from other orders and traces its history to present day and Pope Francis.

Robert Blair Kaiser's "Inside the Jesuits: How Pope Francis is Changing the Church and the World" notes that to better understand this figure who is shaking up and challenging the Catholic Church, it is necessary to understand the pope's Jesuit DNA.

This pope has inspired many books about his life, including "Pope Francis and Our Call to Joy" by Diane M. Houdek, who talks of locating joy through personal encounters with Christ. "The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope," a biography by Austen Ivereigh, gives insight into the context of Bergoglio's life and the vision he has for the Catholic Church.

Don't forget to explore our Hoopla service for additional titles, including "The Church Of Mercy: A Vision for the Church" an audiobook that collects the pope's own words, as well as "Pray for Me: The Life and Spiritual Vision of Pope Francis, First Pope from the Americas" by Robert Moynihan, an introduction to a groundbreaking pope from a papacy expert.

If you have questions — or are just curious — about Pope Francis,

the Catholic Church or the impact all of this will have on the world, your Abilene Public Library is the place to start your search for answers.

Pope Francis does exert influence mainly over the Catholic Church, but his unorthodox methods, challenges to the status quo and strong opinions on current issues such as Christian persecution in the Middle East make him a timely figure of interest and worth further exploration.

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